

Obituary

Earl Judson King



Earl Judson King was born in Toronto in 1901, the son of a Baptist minister. At the age of 16 he won a scholarship to Brandon College and went on from there to the McMaster University, Ontario, where he graduated in chemistry and biology, and subsequently obtained a Master's degree in chemistry and a Doctorate in Philosophy.

In 1926 Sir Frederick Banting invited King to become the biochemist at the new Banting Institute in Toronto and here he began his studies of both silicosis and phosphatase, the two subjects of research which he continued until his death and through which he gained an international reputation. It was while he was in Toronto that in collaboration with A. R. Armstrong he invented a method for estimating phosphatase in the blood, now used all over the world, and known as the King-Armstrong method. It was also while in Toronto that King married Hazel Keith of Lethbridge, Alberta, a former class-mate at Brandon College, who played no small part in his life.

In 1934 King was invited to come to the newly formed Postgraduate Medical School of London to take charge

of the Department of Chemical Pathology. Arriving in 1935 it was here, first as Reader in Chemical Pathology and later as Professor, that he spent the rest of his life. It is probably true to say that this was the ideal job for King and that both his temperament and his scientific ability made him the ideal man for the job. He not only built up a flourishing department of chemical pathology in this new medical school, but, arriving in England at a crucial stage in the development of medical science, he played a major part in developing chemical pathology as a scientific basis for the diagnosis and study of disease, as well as in making it a science in its own right.

In his early years at Hammersmith King devoted his research activities to a study of 'methods' without which the development of modern chemical pathology would have been impossible. He first developed micro-modifications of existing methods and later apparatus, notably the photoelectric colorimeter and the flame photometer, to facilitate these. Always a pioneer in this field, it is natural that King was the first in this country to install in his department apparatus for automatic chemical analysis.

From 1955 onwards King concentrated what time he could spare for research on his two early interests, silicosis, and enzymes in the diagnosis of disease. Apart from his own studies, he played a very large part in the organization of pneumoconiosis research in Britain, and few interested in this field, whether doctors, government officials, or others, failed to seek his advice.

King never spared himself in teaching or helping the students who came to the School. For the London University Diploma in Clinical Pathology he planned the teaching in chemical pathology and helped to organize the whole course. He insisted on a maximum of laboratory work and always preferred tutorials or discussions to formal lectures. Apart from this special course, the Department of Chemical Pathology was always crammed to capacity with students working as apprentices or research assistants. Many of them came from far away and sometimes spoke halting English but the genuine welcome they always got from King must have warmed them. If any were known to be lonely they were always welcome at his home and here tribute must be paid to his wife Hazel, who seemed able to provide unlimited refreshments for all and sundry. Both Earl and Hazel are warmly remembered in all parts of the world.

King's work for the School was not confined to his own department. He took an enthusiastic interest in all the School's activities and was always willing to help behind the scenes or serve on committees which he often found tedious, although he himself helped to relieve their boredom. In his last few years he was senior Professor

in Pathology, Sub-Dean and Chairman of the Academic Board. Not content with this he worked unceasingly in connexion with the appeal for the building fund for the Postgraduate School. The completion of the Wolfson Institute, the first stage in the rebuilding programme, in 1961 was a great joy to him. It was while in Canada for this cause that he had his first coronary thrombosis three years ago. But nothing daunted, he continued this and most of his other activities until the very day of his death. His physicians were wise enough to see he would not have had it otherwise.

In spite of all his work for the School King's outside interests were many. Before leaving Canada he helped to found, and was first secretary (1930-34) of, the Canadian Biochemical Society. Since coming to England his activities have included the following: a member of the International Silicosis Conference at Geneva in 1938 and Corresponding Member in Industrial Medicine of the International Labour Office; Chairman of the Commission on Clinical Chemistry of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry, and also Chairman of the International Federation of Clinical Chemists (both 1951-58); President of the Section for Biological Chemistry of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (1959 onwards); first Chairman of the Council of the British Association of Clinical Biochemists (1953-55) and President (1955-58); Secretary of the Board of Studies in Biochemistry of the University of London (1940-46) and its Chairman (1951-55); Chairman of the Central Academic Council of the British Postgraduate Medical Federation (1952-55); President of the British Occupational Hygiene Society (1954-55).

Like many who have forwarded the progress of medicine in the past, King had no medical qualification, and it gave him great pleasure when in 1961 he was awarded an honorary M.D. by both the University of Oslo and that of Iceland. He was also one of the first non-medical members of the Association of Clinical Pathology, and a member of the Editorial Board of this Journal. His other honours included life membership of the American Association of Clinical Chemists, honorary membership of the Canadian Physiological Society and the Canadian Society for Clinical Chemistry, and the Queen's Coronation Medal.

All this sounds quite impressive but it doesn't begin to describe the man we knew and loved at the Postgraduate School. It is not possible to express in words the warmth of his personality. He wasn't soft, indeed he could be quite brutally blunt, and he loved to tease. Moreover for any cause he had at heart he would use people without scruple. He had always worked hard himself; he expected his staff to do the same. Most of them did and liked it. But active as he was, he was never too busy to be interrupted. Friends, colleagues, students—all were welcome both at work and at home. No scientific or personal problem was too trivial for him to take an interest in and if anyone came to him with a tale of woe he was always ready to help with a half-humorous sympathy. He rarely left his room at the School before 7.00 p.m. and if any of us felt dispirited at the end of a day's work we knew where we could find a friend and perhaps a glass of sherry to cheer us on our way. He has been so much part of the School for so long, it is difficult to believe he is no longer there. At least those who knew him will never forget him. Take it for all in all he was a man.

MARY BARBER

Earl King played a prominent part in the early work of this Journal. Due to his intense interest in the Association of Clinical Biochemists he was able to persuade the Council of the Association of Clinical Pathologists that the Editorial Board of this Journal should also include a representative specially elected by the Association of Clinical Biochemists. This was readily accepted and naturally Earl King became the first representative. He served from 1954 to 1957 and during this time his experience and perspicacity were invaluable. He knew everybody and knew instinctively the value of their work. His criticisms of any claims for new technical methods and improvements were superb and pointed. Above all, however, his enthusiasm for this work was infectious and the Editorial Board meetings were enriched by his clear thinking and his good humour. Owing to pressure of other duties he gave up his editorial appointment in 1957 and was elected to the Advisory Board.

A. GORDON SIGNY